Teaching Excellence

TOWARD THE BEST IN THE ACADEMY

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In the Name of the Student...

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If we remember our own college days, most of us can think of at least one professor who was less than ideal. All of us have had professors who fit one or more of the following descriptions: dull, boring lecturer; confusing and hard to follow; too easy and presents no challenge; and so on. Yet if you describe your worst experience as a student, more than likely it was one in which you were treated unfairly.

For the past two years, much of my research has focused on college students' perceptions of fair practices in the classroom. From this research, I have concluded that unfair treatment is probably the single most important factor in student dissatisfaction with college and student attrition, and perhaps a major contributing factor in students' not achieving to potential. No matter how dynamic and interesting a professor is; no matter how creative he/she is in developing and using innovative techniques in the classroom; and no matter how organized and focused she/he is — if the professor uses unfair practices in the classroom, all of that dynamic, creative brilliance will be for naught.

Few professors will knowingly and deliberately show unfairness by embarrassing students, grading unfairly, or showing bias. Most care about fairness and think of themselves as fair. In rating their own fairness, compared to other college professors (from 1 being the most fair to 10 being the least), 74% gave themselves a 1 or 2. Yet only 12% of the students at the same institution said all of their professors had been fair. The discrepancy may exist because many faculty members do not understand students' perceptions of fair practices. I have found that many teaching practices, although considered exemplary by the faculty and performed for the sake of the students, really violate students' perceptions of fairness. What follows is a sampling of the most common practices in that category. This list is neither exhaustive nor in any particular order of importance, but offered for your consideration.

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1. Letting students choose the course content and evaluation method.

A disturbing trend in education is letting students choose their own course content or "create" their own exams. Professors from several universities, in disciplines from education to history, let students give personal "interpretations" of exams, such as writing poetry, singing songs, or in one case, by turning in a blank sheet of paper. (This student was given an A.) Why do we, as college professors, not give ourselves credit for being professionals? Why do we assume that the students' ideas of what is important is as valid as ours? Are we not as legitimate experts as other professionals? We do not expect our physician to ask us what procedure to use to treat our illness. Yet, some act as if student input into the course content is as valid as ours. Students do not want or expect to choose their own course content. Of course, students should be actively involved in the learning process, just as patients should be actively involved in their own treatment; but faculty members must provide the expertise students expect. Minimally, professors must establish the knowledge to be acquired by students; provide guidelines for readings as course resources; and outline criteria necessary for course completion.

2. Having no discerning standards

Professors who allow students to choose course content often also advocate eliminating grading; others believe that all students who show effort should get As. Research does show that students rate professors as fair if they consider effort for borderline grades. However, students expect grading according to ability and performance and do not expect, nor want, everyone to get high grades. Most students do not want or like ungraded classes. Research shows that most students will work as hard as they have to (but no harder) to get the grade they want. If more work is required to get an A, the students work harder. Setting standards which allow all students to get As simply means many students put forth less effort. Faculty will be considered fair when they set quantifiable measures for meeting standards at all levels of grading, expect students to do well, give extra help to those students willing to try, and allow some leeway for rewarding effort.

3. Not instilling responsibility

Many faculty members have lenient or nonexistent rules for missed tests, late term papers, and habitual tardiness and/or early departure. Just as students will work as hard as necessary to get the grade they want, they will be as responsible as they have to be in following classroom rules and procedures. Classes in which a stu-

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dent cannot take a make-up test without prior approval have fewer students taking make-up tests. Students rate classes with strict policies as fairer than those with lax policies, even when the strict professor gives low grades.

4. Being the students' best friend

Many faculty members, especially new ones or ones who are unsure of themselves, desperately want students to like them and therefore seek to become the students' friend. Then, in order to reestablish the proper position of authority, they must try to be overpowering in the classroom. Students are uncomfortable with a professor who becomes overly friendly. Special harm is created when the professor's friendliness is extended to some students and not to all. A particular problem reported by students is faculty members dating students, which is unfair to both the student involved and other students. Students want faculty to be pleasant, helpful, care about student learning, serve as mentors, and establish mutual respect with students; no more, no less.

5. Insensitivity to diversity

In an effort to show sensitivity to diversity, some professors are trying hard and doing all the wrong things: asking the only African/American student in the class to give the "viewpoint of her people" or separating members of the same ethnic group when assigning study groups or making up seating charts. Even faculty members who are sensitive to ethnic diversity may use gender-based language (such as the generic "he") and treat female students differently. Other faculty, sensitive to both ethnic and gender issues, tell jokes about overweight people or allow students to make negative remarks about gays and lesbians. Faculty members who genuinely want their classrooms to be places where all students are comfortable should be open to feedback on any remark or behavior in the classroom which shows insensitivity.

6. Showing preferential treatment for good students

A professor who prides himself on his excellent teaching recently described a technique which allows him to learn the names of some of his students in order to actively engage them in class discussions. After the first test, he asks his TA to circle the names on the seating chart of all the A students. Thereafter, when he asks a question in class, he calls on the students whose names are circled. This professor has unintentionally skewed the classroom in favor of better students. The students who did not make As would be the ones most in need of attention and most likely to have questions; yet they are the ones being excluded from classroom interactions.

7. Misusing collaborative learning

Collaborative learning has become increasingly popular in college classes, and with good reason, as research shows many positive results are gained from the use of properly executed cooperative learning projects. However, group work is often conducted in ways which students see as unfair: dividing groups so that members of the same ethnic group are not allowed to work together; giving grades for the group product with no acknowledgment of individual effort; requiring groups to work together outside of class, imposing added hardships on special populations, such as returning students, working students, and commuter students; or having no method of monitoring members who do not contribute to the group effort.

8. Not using tests as a learning experience

Some professors, trying to cover as much content as possible and, therefore, wishing to save class time, do not return tests. Unfortunately, this deprives the students of a valuable learning opportunity. When students are allowed to go over the questions they missed, they remember the answers much more easily later. They also rate faculty members who discuss tests as much more caring and fair than those who only post grades. Returning tests to students and letting them ask questions about the tests can take as little as 15-20 minutes for a class of 150. The effect on student learning and satisfaction is well worth the time.

9. Not monitoring cheating

Some professors state that they neither know nor care if students cheat in their classes. My research shows that as many as 90% of students will cheat at least once during their college career. The major factor which determines whether or not they cheat is how likely they are to get away with it. Faculty members who state strict penalties for cheating and closely monitor tests greatly reduce the incidence of cheating in their classes. Students who do not cheat resent the fact that other students are allowed to cheat and go unpunished. Even students who cheat occasionally have more respect for professors who try to reduce cheating.

Successful teaching involves more than improving lecture methods, employing new technologies and involving students in the learning process. Effective teaching must include an understanding of fairness in the classroom. Changing a few behaviors and attitudes can greatly increase student satisfaction and potentially improve learning and retention.

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